

IN THE CLAIMS

Please amend the claims as follows:

Claim 1 (Currently amended): A partially computerized method for acquiring natural gas in large quantities by a gas utility company, wherein the purchase of gas from a gas producer is financed by an intermediary entity, and wherein the purchased gas is distributed to the gas utility company's customers, said method comprising ~~the steps of~~:

negotiating ~~the~~ a purchase, transport, and storage cost of said gas by said gas utility company and said intermediary entity;

determining a quantity of gas to be purchased based at least in part on historic demand data for gas in a geographic territory served by said gas utility company;

acquiring funds to pay for gas purchased by said intermediary entity by issuing debt instruments by said intermediary entity through financial markets;

providing payment by said intermediary entity for said gas and taking title to said gas by said intermediary entity;

carrying out one from the group consisting of transporting said gas to a storage facility and identifying said gas at a predetermined storage facility;

determining gas deliverability capacity of said storage facility by selected measurements of gas pressure at said storage facility to provide for scheduling one of repayment and rollover of said debt instruments;

determining ~~assessing~~ the risk of receiving payment from said gas utility company by said intermediary entity based on selected parameters of said geographic territory using a computer, wherein the risk determination includes assessing the gas deliverability capacity and

the historic demand within said geographic territory and costs associated with said debt instruments;

delivering gas to the gas utility company's customers;

collecting payments by said intermediary entity from said gas utility company for gas delivered to the gas utility company's customers in accordance with a sales contract between said gas utility company and said intermediary entity; and

conducting one selected from the group consisting of repayment and rollover of debt instruments at maturities thereof by said intermediary entity utilizing funds received from said gas utility company pursuant to said sales contract.

Claim 2 (Canceled).

Claim 3 (Canceled).

Claim 4 (Currently amended): The method set forth in Claim 1, wherein[[:]] said selected parameters are determined for subdivisions of said geographic territory defined by postal service code.

Claim 5 (Currently amended): The method set forth in Claim 1, wherein[[:]] said selected parameters are selected from a group consisting of population, residential housing units, retail merchant space, industrial production space, household income and sales tax receipts of said geographic territory.

Claim 6 (Currently amended): The method set forth in Claim 1, wherein[[:]] said selected parameters are selected from a group consisting of historical heating/cooling degree days, present weather forecast, and historical weather by one of an hourly and daily basis within said geographic territory.

Claim 7 (Currently amended): The method set forth in Claim 1, wherein~~[[:]]~~ the selected parameters are selected from a group consisting of population, residential housing units, retail merchant space, industrial production space, household income and sales tax receipts of said geographic territory; and

~~including the steps of~~ the method further comprises:

forecasting demand patterns for gas to be withdrawn from said storage facility based on the selected parameters; and

comparing said demand patterns with the capability of withdrawal of gas from said storage facility by a facility operator~~[[,]]~~; and

deriving a gas release schedule in consideration of the forecasting and comparing.

Claim 8 (Currently amended): The method set forth in Claim 7, ~~including the step of:~~ further comprising notifying said facility operator of requirements to release gas from said storage facility in accordance with the derived gas release schedule.

Claim 9 (Currently amended): The method set forth in Claim 1, ~~including the step of:~~ further comprising forecasting expected cash flows from customers serviced by said gas utility company in said geographic territory.

Claim 10 (Currently amended): The method set forth in Claim 9, ~~including the step of:~~ further comprising determining the requirements for one selected from the group consisting of issuance and reissuance of debt instruments and at least one selected from the group consisting of monetary amounts thereof and maturity dates thereof and issuing debt instruments as required to finance the purchase of said gas by said intermediary entity and corresponding to expected cash flows to said intermediary entity from said gas utility company.

Claim 11 (Currently amended): The method set forth in Claim 1, ~~including the step of:~~
further comprising determining an interest rate to be one selected from the group consisting of
charged to said gas utility company and paid on said debt instruments by assessing risks of loss
by said intermediary entity, said risks of loss selected from a group consisting of interest rate
risk, default on repayment of said debt instruments risk, maturity schedule of debt instruments
risk, injection, storage and deliverability of said gas risk, gas measurement risk, physical loss of
said gas during transmission and in storage risk, business conditions risk and economic risk.

Claim 12 (Currently amended): The method set forth in Claim 11, ~~including the step of:~~
further comprising determining an interest rate to be charged to said gas utility company based
on one or more of said risks.

Claim 13 (Currently amended): The method set forth in Claim 11, ~~including the step of:~~
further comprising assigning a weight value to selected ones of said risks and determining a
composite risk value.

Claim 14 (Currently amended): The method set forth in Claim 1, ~~including the step of~~
further comprising: determining the anticipated producing rate of gas for storage in said storage
facility; and

determining the dollar volume of debt instruments available periodically based on said
rate of production and delivery to storage.

Claim 15 (Currently amended): The method set forth in Claim 1, ~~including the step of~~
further comprising:

monitoring said gas pressure and fill quantities in said storage facility to determine
storage facility performance; and

determining the extent of rollover of debt instruments as said debt instruments reach maturity based on said storage facility performance.

Claim 16 (Currently amended): The method set forth in Claim 1, ~~including the step of:~~ further comprising monitoring the aging of accounts receivable of said gas utility company to determine the risk associated with said intermediary entity achieving a predetermined return on investment.

Claim 17 (Currently amended): The method set forth in Claim 1, ~~including the step of:~~ further comprising acquiring data with respect to said gas utility company related to historical daily temperatures in said geographic territory to determine the selected parameters of expected placement of gas in storage and withdrawal of gas from storage for said gas utility company.

Claim 18 (Currently amended): The method set forth in Claim 1, wherein~~[[:]]~~ said selected parameters are selected from a group consisting of historical heating/cooling degree days, present weather forecast, and historical weather by one of an hourly and daily basis within said geographic territory; and

~~including the steps of~~ said method further comprises:

forecasting demand patterns for gas to be withdrawn from storage based on the selected parameters; ~~and~~

comparing said demand patterns with the capability of withdrawal of gas from said storage facility by a facility operator~~[[,]]~~; and

deriving a gas release schedule in consideration of the forecasting and comparing.

Claim 19 (Currently amended): The method set forth in Claim 18, ~~including the step of:~~ further comprising notifying said facility operator of requirements to release gas from storage in accordance with the derived schedule.

Claim 20 (New): A computer implemented method for acquiring natural gas in large quantities by a gas utility company, wherein the purchase of gas from a gas producer is financed by an intermediary entity, and wherein the purchased gas is distributed to the gas utility company's customers, the method comprising:

receiving a budget of the quantity and timing of gas purchases by the gas utility company over a predetermined period of time over a Internet connection from the gas utility company;

determining the risk of receiving payment from the gas utility company by the intermediary entity based on selected parameters of the geographic territory, wherein the risk determination includes assessing a gas deliverability capacity and a historic demand within a geographic territory and costs associated with debt instruments; and

determining gas deliverability capacity of a storage facility by selected measurements of gas pressure at the storage facility to provide for scheduling one of repayment and rollover of debt instruments issued by the intermediary entity through financial markets.